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Mapping Changing Social Policy Ideas: A Global, Actor-Centred Approach

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Abstract

The objective of this short paper is to map different types of ideas and the actors carrying them in order to show how ideas might impact social policy change at both the global and the local level. The first part defines “ideas” and their various types, while the second part answers two related questions about the potential impact of ideas on social policy development: where do policy ideas come from; and how, and through which actors, are global ideas diffused and adapted to local context? As suggested, studying the role of ideas requires an analysis of the different forms they can take, the diversity of actors carrying them, and the diffusion and translation processes through which ideas move back and forth between the local and the global levels.

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Introduction

The literature on the role of ideas in public and social policy has expanded dramatically over the last two decades (Béland and Cox, 2011; Blyth, 2002; Campbell, 2004; Hall, 1993; Jenson, 2010; Mehta, 2011; Merrien, 1997; Orenstein, 2008; Padamsee, 2009; Parsons, 2007; Schmidt, 2011; Stone 2001). The objective of this short paper is to map different types of ideas and the actors carrying them in order to show how ideas may play a direct role in social policy change at both the global and the local levels.

The first part of the paper defines “ideas” and their various types, while the second part answers two related questions about the potential impact of ideas on social policy development: where do policy ideas come from; and how, and through which actors, are global ideas diffused and adapted to local context? As suggested, studying the role of ideas requires an analysis of the different forms they can take, the diversity of actors carrying them, and the diffusion and translation processes through which ideas move back and forth between the local and the global levels.

Defining and Classifying Ideas

Ideas as Causal Beliefs

The study of ideas in social science and policy research is contested in part because defining and, therefore, analysing “ideas” is a tricky endeavour. One of the main challenges here is that “ideas” take different forms, and the concept of “ideas” can seem overly broad, at least if scholars fail to distinguish between types of ideas and levels of ideational analysis. Yet, it is important to note that the term “ideas” is not more inherently vague or problematic than other broad social science concepts. For instance, “institutions,” which are often associated with “ideas,” also take a variety of forms and encompass many levels of reality (Campbell, 2004). The truth is that, in social policy research as elsewhere, careful use of the term “ideas” is less problematic than using

other broad terms—such as “interests” or “institutions”—without properly defining them.ⁱ

Here, the term “ideas” is just another way to refer to what Craig Parsons (2007) calls “ideational processes,” which are one of the four types of explanation in political and policy analysis, alongside institutional, psychological, and structural explanations. From this perspective, although both ideational and psychological mechanisms are about what Parsons (2007) calls the “logic of interpretation,” according to which actors make sense of their environment, “ideas” are distinct from purely psychological processes, which are about how the brain works in general, regardless of the actor’s historical and social “position.” Importantly, the four types of processes (ideational, institutional, psychological, and structural) can interact to shape certain outcomes and behaviours, depending on the context (Parsons, 2007). In other words, “ideas” are often linked to other types of processes and they do interact with them, just as social policy actors interact with one another and with their environment (Padamsee, 2009).

In this paper, we define ideas as “causal beliefs.” At the broadest level, such beliefs are assumptions about how the world works and how to change it. From this angle, ideas as causal beliefs can have both cognitive and normative components. This means that ideas can be as much about “knowledge” as about the “proper action” to take (Béland and Cox, 2011). Importantly, ideas are closely related to the actors formulating and carrying them, meaning that a sociology of social policy ideas is necessarily a sociology of actors, as actors are involved at different stages of the policy process. Such an actor-centred approach to ideas is emphasized throughout the paper.

Social Policy Concepts and Language

Before mapping different types of ideas and their role in specific moments of the policy process as they relate to concrete actors, we must stress that a focus on social policy

ideas necessitates a close attention to the historical development of social policy language and concepts, which are, in themselves, ideas that actors use to make sense of the world surrounding them, or to wage political battles against other actors promoting alternative policy prescriptions. In the history of social policy, the emergence of new terms and concepts, such as “social insurance,” “welfare state,” or, more recently, “social inclusion,” has played a key role in shaping both policy decisions and the political battles over them. This is true because both newer and older social policy language and concepts are about the constant definition and redefinition of state action in society, as the state interacts with other actors, including businesses, labour unions, and NGOs (Béland and Petersen, 2013). Consequently, the terminology we use to talk about social programming is not innocent, and social policy concepts can become relatively stable “cultural categories” capable of shaping the perceptions of actors and, ultimately, policy decisions. The work of sociologist Brian Steensland (2008) on the negative meaning of the term “welfare” in the United States and its impact on social assistance reform during the Nixon presidency (1969–1974) illustrates this claim about the role of social policy language as a consequential ideational and political reality.

Policy Moments and Types of Ideas

Ideas can take different forms and their roles are likely to change from one moment of the policy process to the other. A good way to map the policy process and the role of ideas within it is John W. Kingdon’s (1995) now-classic distinction between the problem, policy, and political streams, three aspects of policy development that interact with one another in complex, non-linear ways (Béland, 2005; Kingdon, 1995; Mehta, 2011).

Within the problem stream, where actors identify and give meaning to the policy challenges facing society and the state, ideas take the form of contested problem

definitions (Mehta, 2011; Stone, 2001). From this perspective, social policy problems are not purely objective realities but historically contingent definitions that change over time, as new problems are identified and older problems are redefined. A striking example of this type of problem definition and redefinition is the now-popular concept of “new social risks,” which is about how recent demographic, economic, and social trends have transformed the uncertainty workers and families face in contemporary societies (Taylor-Gooby, 2004). The idea of “new social risks” encompasses a certain way to define today’s socio-economic reality and the problems social policy actors should tackle in priority. This is why this idea is related to particular policy prescriptions (Hacker, 2006) and to the adoption of new social programs (Bonoli, 2005). The same remark about the historically-constructed nature of policy problems applies to the emergence of the idea of social exclusion (and social inclusion) on the world stage over the last two decades, and to the ongoing redefinition of the concept of poverty within global and national policy communities, which are each having a direct policy impact in both advanced industrial countries and the Global South (Béland, 2007; Council of Europe, 2012; Foli and Béland, 2014; United Nations, 2010).

In the context of the policy stream, experts formulate potential policy alternatives to address the problems that emerge within the problem stream (Kingdon, 1995; Mehta, 2011). One way actors design and select potential policy alternatives is by referring to a coherent economic policy paradigm, such as Keynesianism or monetarism (Hall, 1993; for critical perspectives on the concept of policy paradigm see Carstensen, 2011 and Daigneault, forthcoming). Yet, actors do not always draw on one coherent approach to develop policy alternatives, as “bricolage” is a common type of ideational process, where ideas borrowed from various sources are combined and recombined to create something new (Campbell, 2004; Carstensen, 2011). It is probably better to see paradigms and bricolage as two poles between which most policy alternatives

formulated within the policy stream are located, rather than as two radically distinct and incompatible types of behaviour.

Finally, within the policy stream, policy entrepreneurs are busy linking different policy problems and solutions to impose concrete legislative and reform proposals (Kingdon, 2005). In this context, strategic framing becomes especially central, as policy entrepreneurs and their allies do their best to convince other political actors as well as the general public that their policy proposal should be enacted (Béland, 2005; Campbell, 2004). Such discourses can take different forms and target different constituencies, depending on the institutional context at hand (Schmidt, 2011). For instance, from an ideological standpoint, policy proposals might be framed in ways that make them ambiguous, which could lead to people on both the left and the right to support them (Palier, 2005). For instance, a particular pension reform might please unions for a certain reason, and employers for a different reason (Bonoli, 2000). In this context, emphasizing some aspects of the proposed reform in front of one audience and other aspects of it in front of other constituencies may become an effective framing device used by policy entrepreneurs and their allies to help foster ambiguous yet resilient political coalitions (on ambiguity and coalition building, see Palier, 2005).

Beyond these three streams, students of ideas and social policy should take into consideration two other policy moments located beyond agenda-setting and the enactment process and, therefore, not central to Kingdon's (2005) model: policy implementation and policy evaluation (Howlett and Ramesh, 2003). First, during the implementation of concrete social policy reforms, the collective beliefs of bureaucrats, labour officials, professional groups, or NGOs involved in implementing them can have a direct impact on their actual fate on the ground. For instance, the way health professionals in sub-Saharan Africa perceive user fees may affect the success of recent policy initiatives to waive them (Béland and Ridde, 2014). Second, once policies are

implemented in their jurisdiction or even abroad, local policy actors can evaluate them and draw lessons for their future social policy initiatives (Hall, 1993; Rose, 1991). Simultaneously, international organizations and other transnational actors can draw lessons from a social program adopted in a specific country and transform that country into a sought-after “model” other countries are invited to study and draw inspiration from. The example of Chile in the global debate about pension privatization illustrates this claim (Merrien, 2001; Orenstein, 2008).

Finally, it is worth mentioning two other key ideational concepts that are not closely associated to one policy moment in particular: public sentiments (Campbell, 2004) and political ideologies (Freeden, 2003). Public sentiments refer to the ideational content of “public opinion,” which has direct implications for different aspects of social policy development (Brooks and Manza, 2007). Political ideologies, such as liberalism, socialism, and social democracy, provide broad cognitive and normative templates, genuine “world views” through which political parties, pressures groups, and individual citizens locate themselves (Berman, 2011; Freedden, 2003). These slow-moving and all-encompassing political ideologies constitute the macro-historical side of the ideational landscape, as they interact with specific policy ideas such as problem definitions, while appearing as potential sources of symbols that political actors and policy entrepreneurs may use to shape public sentiments and, more generally, oppose or support concrete social programs. In France, for example, the term “solidarity,” which is embedded in that country’s Republican ideology, has long been used to legitimize social programs of various kinds (Bourgeois, 1998 [1896]; Henderson, 1905; Paugam, 2007; Rosanvallon, 2000).

Actors and Processes

To better understand the role of ideas in social policy development, we need to at least briefly address two basic questions: where do policy ideas come from? How, and through which actors, are global ideas diffused and adapted to local context?

Where do Policy Ideas Come From?

This is one of the most central questions in understanding the role of ideas in social policy research. The most basic answer to this question is simple: “ideas can come from anywhere” (Kingdon, 1995: 72). As Kingdon (1995: 72) puts it, “nobody has a monopoly on ideas. They come from a plethora of different sources.” Although it is clear policy experts are the most common sources of policy alternatives, actors as different as business leaders, labour officials, and social movement leaders can formulate new policy proposals. More important, the nature of the actors most likely to formulate new ideas or reframe existing ones varies greatly from one type of ideas to the other. For instance, political ideologies are typically framed and reframed by politicians and public intellectuals (Freedon, 2003), while policy alternatives are more likely to emerge within “policy communities” populated by experts (Haas, 1992). In any particular country, existing political institutions and policy legacies shape the production of expertise and explain why some actors are more prominent than others. For instance, as far as the production and diffusion of policy alternatives is concerned, state bureaucrats play a greater role in the production of expertise in France, and experts working for think tanks are more influential in the United States (Campbell and Pedersen 2011). In contrast, framing processes may originate from a number of sources, ranging from journalists, political parties, and social movements (Béland, 2005; Campbell, 2004; Ferree, 2003; Snow et al., 1986).

Beyond identifying the categories of actors especially influential in the formation and diffusion of particular types of ideas, the question of where ideas come

from also concerns their geographical origin. For instance, in today's globalized world, are most policy ideas generated at the local level in a particular country, or at the global level by international organizations and other transnational actors? Because public policy remains (even within the European Union) largely the prerogative of national states, most if not all policy ideas emerge at the local level, before they are diffused and reframed by transnational actors, who can use local experiments to promote particular "models" at the global or regional level (Orenstein, 2008). For example, the idea of social exclusion first appeared in France, before it began a rich transnational life (Béland, 2007; Goguel d'Allondans, 2003; Levitas, 2005; Saith, 2007; Silver, 1994). The idea of pension privatization emerged among neoliberal economists in the 1970s, before being implemented for the first time in Chile under Pinochet and, finally, being diffused by the World Bank and other international organizations in the 1990s (Blackburn, 2004; Merrien, 2001; Orenstein, 2008). More recently, Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs), simultaneously designed in Brazil and Mexico, began a successful global policy life through the actions of prominent actors who helped diffuse this policy model all around the world, in the Global South and beyond (Fenwick, 2013).

How are Global Ideas Diffused and Adapted to Local Context?

The above examples suggest that both neoliberal and statist policy ideas emerging in specific countries can be later diffused at the global level by transnational actors, and much has been written about such actors and diffusion processes (Campbell, 2004; Deacon, 2007; Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Jenson, 2010; Mahon, 2009; Orenstein, 2008; Stone, 2004).ⁱⁱ This now-abundant literature clearly demonstrates that globally diffused policy ideas often find their way back onto the local level, as international organizations and other transnational actors such as consultants and think tanks attempt to shape social policies in countries all around the world.

Take large international organizations like the World Bank, for example. Alongside financial constraints related to concrete loans known as “conditionality,” which is a central tool of policy influence in only some countries, such international organizations have many other ways to diffuse the particular policy ideas they support at a particular point in time (Deacon, 2007; Jenson, 2010; Orenstein, 2008). For instance, these organizations can organize conferences, publish policy reports online, send consultants to different countries, and talk directly to state and other national and even sub-national actors. As Orenstein (2008) suggests, under many circumstances, in order for international organizations to diffuse their preferred ideas at the local legislative and policy level, they must collaborate with the “veto players” (political actors who can prevent or permit the enactment of local policy change) in power in specific countries. This means that such organizations have to work with powerful local, country-based actors who are in a position to implement concrete policy ideas at the national and sub-national level. In other words, even in the Global South, the politics of transnational ideas is more than a story about coercion and imposition on the part of international organizations (Orenstein, 2008).ⁱⁱⁱ

Keeping this reality in mind, when dealing with the diffusion of social policy ideas and their implementation at the local level, “translation” is an especially relevant concept, as it refers to the ways in which actors adapt foreign or global policy ideas to make them fit into the dominant categories and institutions of their jurisdiction (Campbell, 2004). Translation can take different forms, from changing the language used and reframing identical policy ideas to transforming exiting ideas into something new, through bricolage, for example. Translation is a crucial concept to understand how social policy ideas travel and change from place to place, and how different ideas interact in a particular context. For instance, the same policy alternative can be framed differently in two otherwise similar countries, because of variations in the nature of

dominant problem definitions or political ideologies between these countries. Overall, ideas interact with other types of factors, such as institutions and structural forces (Padamsee, 2009; Parsons, 2007). At the same time, different types of ideas—and the various actors carrying them—constantly interact with one another, which can foster change at both the local and the global level.

Conclusion

This short paper offers a toolbox and a framework to study the role of global social policy ideas in a changing, globalized world. Simultaneously, it represents a call for more systematic research about the role of such ideas that emphasizes the existence of different types of ideas and of actors carrying them, and the need to explore how they interact in processes of global diffusion and local translation.

Endnotes

ⁱ For a critical take on “interests” see Parsons, 2007.

ⁱⁱ As Kingdon (1995: 72) reminds us, however, finding out where and when a particular policy idea emerged in the first place is not always necessary, at least when the primary goal is to explain specific policy decisions in a particular country. Yet, it is unfortunate that the comparative and transnational history of social policy ideas, concepts and languages mentioned above is such a neglected aspect of contemporary welfare research. This is the true because tracing the development and diffusion of such ideational processes over time can help both scholars and practitioners better understand why they think the way they think, and how other experts and political actors around the world perceive concrete policy issues the way they do, over time (Béland and Pedersen, 2014).

ⁱⁱⁱ These remarks should not obfuscate the existence of asymmetrical power relations in the Global South, the ideational vulnerability of countries in dire need of conditional loans, or the fact that social movements and policy actors who do not hold a formal “veto point” within a country’s political system have no power to shape the politics of ideas, and even collaborate with transnational actors to foster policy change and the ideas necessary to bring it about. It is also worth noting that, beyond global consultants and international organizations, other actors such as academics, public intellectuals, and social movements may participate in the transnational diffusion of policy ideas.

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